

THE DIVINE ORDINARY: WHAT THE WEST CAN LEARN FROM CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

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This paper is a work of what I call “critical comparativism.” I compare civilizations and try to use the results to suggest more critical ways of thinking about our own society. One of the benefits of comparativism is that it allows us to be critical of a society by referring to actual examples of alternative ways of doing or thinking found in other societies. It undercuts the charge of utopianism often laid on proponents of change in a given society. If we can point to actual, living examples of alternative practice, it is therefore uncontested that it can be done, and that it is at least possible that it will turn out over time to be a good decision. One of the most distressing aspects of, for example, the health care debate in the U.S. has been the near absence of a comparative perspective. While Canada’s system was sometimes cited, generally inaccurately, in the debate, the public discussion was carried on as if no other society had ever tried to build or reform their health care system. It was this lack of comparativism that led to the relatively trite level of discussion and far from optimal result.

Along the same lines, I will suggest that Chinese philosophy can be of use to Westerners. Chinese philosophy can be of use because it can fill the gaps left by Western philosophy and religion. The gap in Western philosophy and religion is most likely a result of its transcendental character, which focuses on what Nietzsche called the “otherworldly.” Chinese religion and philosophy is more concerned with “this-worldliness” in the sense that it concerns itself more with the problems of dealing with this life. While Western religion tends to one’s fate in the afterlife, Chinese religion deals primarily with living ordinary life.

The problem with transcendence is as follows. While the West has engaged in many immensely fruitful investigations into transcendent metaphysical matters, the quest for the ultimacy tends to undermine concern for day to day living, the ordinary. But most of our time is spent on ordinary, mundane matters, and so a transcendent philosophy neglects much of life.

The transcendence that is so much a part of Western philosophy and religion is less of a concern to Chinese philosophy. Some believe transcendence is not present at all in Chinese philosophy.¹ Both Confucianism and Daoism, with qualifications, offer non-transcendent philosophies of life. Buddhism, with its Indian origin, is a more transcendent philosophy and religion, but even Buddhism offers an approach that attends to some ordinary aspects of life. Buddhism, of course, recommends the elimination of the self, but it too is centered on living in the world. It addresses the cultivation of people in this world, even though its recommendation is non-attachment.

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¹Hall, David, and Ames, Roger, *Thinking from the Han*, SUNY Press, 1998.

But I will not discuss Buddhism further, both because of its Indian origins and because its philosophy is ambiguous with regard to immanence and transcendence. Common to Confucianism and Daoism, however, is a core concern with self-cultivation, which is a decidedly non-transcendental activity.

While there is great overlap between the immanence and transcendence distinctions and the ordinary and extraordinary, the overlap is not total. One could derive a philosophy of ordinary life from transcendental premises, but the orientation would always be otherworldly. The ultimate purpose would be a transcendental one even though the advice would be this-worldly. More likely, and what I see from Western philosophy and religion, is a “mundane” ordinary unrelated in any deep sense to the key premises of Western religion and philosophy. The ordinary would simply be mundane and practical, a matter of mere prudence. What I would like to explore is a different kind of “ordinary,” a “divine ordinary.” By “divine” ordinary I do not mean anything having to do with a divinity, a god or transcendent being, but a recognition of an orientation to the world that is deeply meaningful without any reference to a transcendent being or purpose. In my view, this is precisely what we can discern in both Confucianism and Daoism.

The first impression a Westerner has in reading Confucian philosophy and Chinese history is that of ceremoniousness. And Confucians are in fact well known for being very ceremonial. So we read in the *Analects* such advice as “In festive ceremonies it is better to be sparing than extravagant.”² Ceremoniousness often regulates important occasions, but it also a matter of tending to “the simple things.” Things as simple and mundane as serving tea or arranging flowers can be elevated to an art. Ceremony makes simple things important and can even turn them into art forms. Even staying at a Ryokan in Japan gives the Westerner a sense of the art and ceremony of Confucian etiquette. To the Westerner this sounds like mere etiquette, and makes Confucians sound like “Miss Manners.” But Confucians simply do not make the distinction between etiquette and ethics. For Confucians, ethics begin with etiquette.

The Confucian elevation of etiquette to ethics often puzzles the Western student of Chinese philosophy. Confucians often seem to be concerned with mundane matters of life rather than the transcendent. Confucius writes, “On the day the Master wept he did not sing.”³ Or “He did not instruct while eating, nor did he continue to converse once he retired to bed.”⁴ Confucianism tells you how to live your home life, your aesthetic existence, your professional life and your public life in some detail while neglecting the transcendent matters of ultimate meaning. In the *Analects* it is written that the Master “did not discuss prodigies, feats of strength, disorderly conduct or the supernatural.”⁵ One cannot address the transcendent without discussing the

²*Analects*, 4.3, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean.*, trans. James Legge. New York: Dover, 1971

³*Analects*, 7:10. Trans. Edward Slingerland, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003. p.67

⁴*Analects*, 10:10. Trans. Edward Slingerland, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003. P.104

⁵*Analects*, 7:21 Trans. Edward Slingerland, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003. P.104

supernatural, so Confucius is ruling out of court precisely what the Westerner thinks is so important.

Confucian etiquette is often derided as an unfortunate addendum to an otherwise sophisticated ethical philosophy. While some criticism is warranted, it is not always noticed that there is some sense in linking ethics and etiquette. Ethical conflicts sometimes arise precisely when etiquette breaks down. A breach of etiquette is often interpreted as a betrayal or a show of disrespect. Both betrayal and disrespect are immoral because they fail to give a person their due. They are ultimately matters of unfairness and certainly a breach of personal solidarity. Thus etiquette and morality become indelibly linked.

Etiquette is central to the Confucian ideal of “the Gentleman.” The Confucian ideal of the Gentleman is very “this-worldly.” While there are Western counterparts to the Confucian code of Gentlemanliness, such as in Victorian England, they do not play the constitutive role in their culture that Ren plays in Chinese culture. For Chinese philosophy, Gentlemanliness is absolutely central to living the good life and indeed, the cosmic order. For Confucius, any breach in etiquette can have social and cosmic consequences. If the emperor or even an ordinary person fails to live up to his duty then war, economic ruin, floods or earthquakes may result. Now it may be thought that the connection to the cosmic order signals a transcendent connection between Gentlemanliness and another world, but this would be to misunderstand Confucianism. For Confucianism, the cosmic order is intimately connected to the social and personal orders. The term “connected” may be misleading in this context. Just as yin and yang are not clearly distinct, but rather two intermingling sides of one reality, so the personal, social and cosmic orders are not really distinct from each other.

It is precisely this deep connection between the cosmic order and ordinary life that the Westerner finds inadequate. The reason the Westerner finds this inadequate is that the Westerner feels the Confucians have just not moved to the next level of religiosity, the transcendent. The Westerner feels that Confucians must not be very deep. This, of course, is a mistake. Confucianism is a very deep philosophy; it is simply a more immanent teaching. Being in the world is therefore the center of Confucianism. Being in the world requires attention to one’s relationships to others, hence the Confucian focus on the five relationships.

Confucius’ belief in the need to respect authority, both within the family and within the state is not foreign to the West, but it is something a reading of Confucius may help us to remember. I will focus on three areas, respect for parents, respect for academic authorities and respect for public officials. In each of these areas we see problems in the West, particularly the U.S., which could be alleviated by utilizing elements of Confucianism. However, I set aside some of the standard relationships such as husband-wife, elder and younger brother, and respect for elders. The reason I set these aside is that each of these relationships is different in the West than in traditional China such that Confucianism would not be able to get a good foothold. The women’s movement has radically altered our understanding of male-female relations in profound ways. In fact, the whole edifice of what forms relationships can take has been changed and is still “under construction.” We no longer assume a mix

of male and female. We no longer assume two to a relationship. We no longer assume monogamy. All these are negotiated, all of these are chosen. Beyond this realization is the realization that all structural relationships are processes rather than endpoints. We can never say “this is how the lesbian relationship should be conducted,” or “this is how a traditional male-female monogamous marriage must work.” So the West will never agree to formalize any of these relationships such that they can stand as something we can recommend adherence to. So how could Confucianism contribute anything here? Confucianism is probably of little help in this area where so much is in flux and a matter of preference.

It is interesting that even though China lived most of its history under Confucianism with its attendance to the elder and younger brother relationship, being brothers in the royal family, or any powerful family, was rather dangerous. That is no longer the case however, in either China or the West, so Confucian ideals here could be useful, but they are not that important to the social order. Sibling relationships are not as central to the functioning of a society as the other relationships.

Respect for elders, while helpful to the functioning of a civil society, is also not as central as the other relationships I discuss. It is prudent for a young person to respect adults because their greater number of years endows them with a wisdom the young have not had the opportunity to acquire. But this is a temporary deference, and probably should be. A forty year old should not automatically assume a fifty year old is wiser generally, and should certainly not assume the fifty year old is smarter on a particular subject. This assumes that what we want to respect is knowledge, and we shall see that respect for academic authority will provide most of what we want from respect for elders. Nevertheless, it still seems appropriate for wide differences in age to count for something.

Respect for leaders is very different in a democracy than in an Imperial order. First of all, public officials are regarded as public servants. Servants do not typically get deferred to. But here we may distinguish deference and respect. If one has a servant or subordinate of any kind, then while deference is not owed, we do say that the subordinate deserves respect. And it is here that the U.S. is failing and can learn from Confucianism. Confucianism argues for respect and deference to public officials. But public officials are held in very low esteem according to opinion polls, and we see public officials enduring character assassination on a daily basis. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that many public servants behave in despicable ways. How are we to maintain respect for a group of people who have so severely disappointed us? I believe we must try to show respect whenever possible, and to create a political system in which worthy people are encouraged to behave in an upstanding manner. The main reason Americans do not respect politicians is because so many times their decisions seem to be made for other than rational and moral reasons. But unless we think that this moment in history is characterized by a set of politicians who just happen to be morally deficient in some way, then there must be systematic reasons they fail. My own analysis of this phenomenon is that the quality of politicians in the U.S. is a function of the role of money in the electoral and legislative process. If the U.S. did more to insulate politicians from the influence of money the U.S. would probably have a different quality of politician. But if the U.S.

did manage to create a system in which rational and moral reasons would have more power in the deliberative process, then there would be good reasons to show politicians respect. I am not naïve about the prospects for this kind of reform, but it would provide us with a chance to add respect for our leaders to the other social glues that make society work.

But there is another aspect to this problem. The people need to realize that just because a politician disagrees with you, it does not mean they are corrupt. They may have what they consider to be good reasons for their positions. And personal failings, particularly in the area of personal relationships, should be differentiated from political corruption. Given the changes in our ideas of the possible romantic arrangements and the truth that the U.S. is undergoing a set of transformations in its understandings of these things, we should remove personal questions from the political process altogether.

Even more worrisome is the recent undermining of the authority of the academic world. In the West, and in the U.S. in particular, there is a concerted effort to question academic authority, primarily from the political right. A large part of the cause of this disrespect comes from the populace hearing academics argue points anathema to conservative outlooks. Evolution, global warming, anti-religious sentiment and so on leave the conservative antagonistic to academic authority. But this is a very dangerous attitude to take since the academic world (as a whole, not individual academics) is the only good arbiter of theoretical disputes. The academic world contains a system for rewarding good opinions and punishing bad ones that would be hard to replace if it were completely discredited. One should acknowledge the authorities in any field. This is a highly rational policy, and one that is under political attack in the U.S. The far right is active in undermining the authority of academics, scientists, government bureaucrats, elected leaders.

This is just one part of the coarsening of U.S. culture. Popular culture in the West is a cultural wasteland. Although some very good art gets produced now and then, the general trend is toward aesthetic degradation. Popular culture adheres to no aesthetic standards because there is no real connection between the two. Popular culture has a primarily economic function. It produces what people will buy. What people buy has little to do with aesthetics. This is because people have very little interest in aesthetic standards. Yes, there are groups of people who are very concerned with aesthetics, but these people are a small minority. Thus popular culture is a wasteland because people are largely uncultured. People are uncultured because there is no emphasis on self-cultivation.

And here we have another aspect of Confucianism from which the West could benefit. In fact, most of the Confucian approach to the ordinary is to be found in his doctrine of self-cultivation. The Confucian concept of self-cultivation is well-known to scholars of Chinese philosophy, but it is a notion that Americans have yet to really appreciate. Americans do, however, have a sense that Asians tend to be more academically oriented. This academic orientation is rooted in Confucian self-cultivation as well as centuries of focus on an examination system based on Confucian principles. Further, East Asian academic success in the West can be attributed directly to the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation.

Attention to self-cultivation is the key Confucian notion that would enhance the lives of Westerners. The Analects begin with “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?”⁶ The Confucian gentleman is expected to engage in self-improvement, particularly in the realm of cultural sophistication. The gentleman is expected to educate themselves, but this self-education goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge, it is a matter of changing one’s character for the better. This self-education is the most important task of the gentleman after that of maintaining proper relationships. It also something quite foreign to Westerners. Westerners train for a job, a specialty. There is little sense of the need for well-roundedness. Confucius said, “If you one day renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation.”⁷ For Westerners, self-cultivation is something almost completely associated with educational institutions. The one exception to the emphasis on specialization is therefore the undergraduate college curriculum, but even there it is a constant battle to maintain a non-trivial core of general education against those who would continually shrink until it is so small as to be dispensable.

The emphasis on self-cultivation pretty much ends with a student’s undergraduate education. Students are expected to take classes outside their own field while undergraduates, but there is no cultural expectation that people should continue self-cultivation once their college years are over. People may retrain or gain new specialties, but there is no cultural injunction to continue to learn outside one’s own field for the purpose of becoming a better person.

In the West we have the interesting but saddening phenomenon of people of extreme sophistication in one specific field of knowledge showing incredible ignorance in others. This is particularly troubling since these sorts of people tend to believe that their expertise in their specialty gives them a special insight into all fields of knowledge. One of the worst examples is that of businessmen who believe that knowledge of business practices is the ideal training for any other sort of knowledge. In fact, “the business model” tends to colonize all fields of study. How many times have we heard that the best way to do something is to “run it like a business”? We see this most often in politics, but it occurs in many fields. My own university became enamored of the business practice of “downsizing” in order to increase efficiency even though the net effect was simply to lose students for years. All this is able to persist because of people’s pitiful knowledge and skill outside their single specialty. Citizenship is another area where the lack of self-cultivation is detrimental. People in democracies are asked to vote on all kinds of issues, but rarely do they take the time to acquire any depth on what they are voting. What happens then is that perceived self-interest becomes the sole guide to voting. I say “perceived self-interest” since people often vote against their real self interests. Indeed, without self-cultivation and the critical abilities that come with it people are easily deceived about their self-

⁶Analects, 1.1, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean.*, trans. James Legge. New York: Dover, 1971, 137.

⁷Great Learning, 2. 1., *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean.*, trans. James Legge. New York: Dover, 1971. 351

interests. This lack of sophistication also makes them easy prey for commercial and ideological interests to brainwash them to believe corporate or other special interests are really their own. In my view, that is precisely what happened with the recent Tea Party movement in the U.S.

Nor is there any understanding that self-cultivation is in any way beneficial to society. In fact, people who are cultivated are often derided for being elitist. There is no sense that we can all gain by the cultural enrichment of individuals. But at the same time we worry about the increasing coarsening of our culture. Should we be surprised that popular culture becomes ever more silly and crude when the people it is addressed to never get told that it is their duty to resist this kind of culture?

Because Americans have no theory of self-cultivation American business tends to de-skill much of its labor. Because Americans understand this de-skilling they take little pride in their work. Nor do they enjoy it. Something like ninety percent of Americans hate their jobs. And they certainly are not very good at them. For Confucius, “the superior man in everything uses his utmost endeavors.”⁸ While this might be true for a certain percentage of Americans, it is certainly not true of the majority. Most workers are content to learn the basics of their jobs and leave it at that. The person waiting on a customer at Walmart is unlikely to know their store or the products in it any better than the customer.

Americans could also use rather more sophistication in the area of food. Confucius said, “There is no body but that eats and drinks. But there are few who can distinguish flavors.”⁹ The obesity epidemic in the U.S. is at least partly caused by the lack of self-cultivation in the area of food consumption. Americans want quick, high calorie, fat-filled and otherwise unhealthy foods. The whole concept of fast food is an affront to self-cultivation.

Why is there so little emphasis of self-cultivation in the West? In my view, it comes down to an over-emphasis on one of the two parts of ethics. Morality can be divided between the ethics of justice and the ethics of self-realization. The West has typically emphasized the ethics of justice while the East is more concerned with self-realization. Both cultures deal with justice and self-realization, but in much different degrees and at different times.

Just as important than the connection to justice is the simple claim that ordinary behavior should be ordered. Whether or not it tends to decrease the opportunities for unethical encounters between people, it may be the case that it is worthwhile to order one’s day to day activities. It may be beneficial to do mundane things in the same way every day to the point that they are almost unthinking. It saves one’s thoughts for more important matters. And if one doesn’t want to think at all, then one can just ride the pattern of one’s day with almost no effort.

There is some dispute over how we are to think about the Dao in Daoism. Some regard the Dao as a transcendental notion, while others think this is a misunderstanding of the Dao and that the Daoist Dao is immanent, a part of the world

⁸Ibid.

⁹Doctrines of the Mean, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean.*, trans. James Legge. New York: Dover, 1971, 387.

rather than a separate entity.¹⁰ While there is much to be said for the transcendental interpretation, my own view is that the Dao is immanent. The key, however, for the purposes of this paper, is that the Dao is not “otherworldly.” The Dao is not thought of as something that is beyond ordinary life; rather, the Dao is immanent in it. Even though it may be impossible to describe, as the Dao de Qing indicates, that does not mean it is distinct from it. Daoism is an anti-transcendental mysticism. But whatever the proper interpretation of the Daoist Dao, Daoism does address living in this world, and it is this aspect that I will be exploring. In fact, I will only be considering a single passage from the Chuang Tzu, and I will be giving it a decidedly unmystical interpretation in order to make it useful to the Western mind.

Cook Ting:

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee - zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

"Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wen-hui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!" Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now - now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

"A good cook changes his knife once a year-because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month-because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room - more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

"However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until - flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."

"Excellent!" said Lord Wen-hui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life!"¹¹

This passage is one that can go a long way toward helping us live lives of both efficiency and aesthetic quality. It also shows us another way to live in accordance with the Dao that goes beyond living in correspondence with an already existing

¹⁰See Hall and Ames, *Anticipating China*, SUNY Press, 1995, 146-158 and 225-237.

¹¹<http://www.terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html#3>

pattern of life. Instead, we can create a Dao through proper care and practice of everyday activities. I will be giving this passage a pragmatist interpretation that takes it out of the typically mystical Daoist context. This may be doing an interpretive injustice, but it will be a beneficial interpretive injustice since Americans and Europeans are unlikely to be interested in the more mystical aspects of the Dao. On the other hand, they may be open to the benefits of a secular pragmatist doctrine of mundane behavior that really does not conflict with the theological biases of Westerners.

Notice first that Cook Ting employed both knowledge and repetition to achieve his proper caring for life. He used knowledge of anatomy to guide his hand in the beginning, but after a long period of repetition was able to internalize this knowledge to the point that it almost did not even count as knowledge anymore. A comparable case would be the jazz musician, who begins by learning the theory of music and then repetitiously applies this knowledge until it becomes second nature. In fact, the term “second nature” is very appropriate, for the musician and Cook Ting are both creating another “nature” to which they then adhere. I take this as a major contribution of Chuang Tzu, namely, that the Dao we should attempt to be harmony with may be a harmony that we create rather than find already present in the world. Both Daoists and jazz musicians are often heard exhorting people to “stop thinking.” In my view, the best way to interpret this is to say it means we should *get beyond* thinking rather than merely stop thinking. I’ve always found the mystical and anti-intellectual tendencies of Daoism unpalatable anyway, and this way of interpreting the Cook Ting passage gives us what we need from Daoism without having to accept what we do not need, namely more mysticism.

In any case, this pattern is applicable to most behaviors. Most activities in life can be brought into this framework with great benefit. Many of the problems I listed earlier in this paper can be alleviated by simple adherence to this method, and life can become much easier and better with the application of the method. First of all, we could all become better at the things we do, both the ordinary things as well as the extraordinary.

Ordinary activities can become less burdensome and boring with adherence to the Cook Ting method. If we pattern those parts of our lives to maximize efficiency and then practice them to the point of effortlessness we make ordinary activities highly accurate and even aesthetically pleasing. One’s morning patterns can become a thing of beauty as implausible as that sounds. With set patterns one is less likely to forget things. And remembering almost does not come into the picture since if the pattern is internalized there is simply nothing to remember.

Westerners appreciate skill primarily in professional matters. We admire the professional athlete, but not the waitress who manages to handle several tables at the same time. We admire the Corporate CEO, but not the middle level manager who quickly overcomes each managerial problem that arises. There is little pride taken in the efficient and aesthetic operation of one’s duties unless one is engaged in a role that explicitly calls for high-level skill. In fact, there is almost the opposite attitude toward ordinary jobs. There is almost a cult of the “slacker.” But we all lose when we accept the cult of the slacker. Everything is more complicated. Everything takes

longer. And it is no surprise that slackers are not the happiest people in the world. In fact, I would argue that they, in a sense, are not in the world at all. They simply flail at the margins, complain and snicker. They end up accomplishing nothing for themselves, and they create more work and aggravation for the rest of us.

Although this paper is concerned primarily with the ordinary, the extraordinary things are equally amenable to the Cook Ting method. It is sometimes said that it takes 10,000 hours to acquire mastery of anything, and there is some truth to it. The musician who practices three hours a day for ten years will probably become a master if they utilize the available knowledge in the process. The athlete who does the same will also be successful.

Key conceptual relationships become clear with this method, namely, the relationship between creativity, knowledge and repetition. It is sometimes thought that creativity arises from some sort of mystical ability, that it comes out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. But this is a serious mistake that has plagued artists and musicians for years. Real creativity arises out of knowledge and repetition. The audience hears the jazz musician create sophisticated improvisations on the spot and comes to believe these are the result of some special genius. What they do not understand is that this performance is the result of thousands of hours of serious practice, and that this practice involved significant study and repetition. It is true, of course, that some skills come more quickly to some, but this does not mean that significant effort was not made in getting to the point of genius, or that significant study was not involved.

Some may find this pragmatist interpretation of the Dao unacceptable. It almost turns the Dao into a concept of optimality and therefore takes away the magic of the Dao. I plead guilty. In my view, optimality and the Dao are complementary. Whereas the Dao is typically understood in opposition to the logic of maximization, it may actually be quite compatible with it. The reason Daoism says to seek the low spot is that one encounters less strife there. But if we can lessen strife or contention by setting up a maximized process that encompasses all of society, not just those in the low spot, then we are all better off.

This way of interpreting the Cook Ting passage also makes Daoism less incompatible with Confucianism. Confucianism was the philosophy of the bureaucracy in East Asia for hundreds of years, and all the while it was opposed by Daoists who rebelled against the restrictions of bureaucracy. But if we take the Cook Ting passage to its logical conclusion, then this opposition could be mitigated. The bureaucrat does the little things that need to be done for the proper functioning of the state, and if they are done well we are all better off. This is another point the West would do well to learn. There is a deep distrust of bureaucracy in the developed countries of the West, particularly in the US. But it is simply realism to realize that bureaucracies are indispensable to a modern nation. Once we make that realization we can turn to streamlining and optimizing it. In a democracy this is difficult because of different fundamental values among the citizenry. This means one person's optimization may not be another's. But if we move down to mundane levels we may find more opportunity for agreement. If we are going to provide social security, then we should provide it in the most efficient way possible, and in a way that is sustainable. Let's set that up for the long run and then leave it alone unless someone

has a plan to increase efficiency in a significant way. Separating the mundane from the contested is necessary to the rational operation of the state. Such a method will not eliminate political disagreement, but it may decrease the amount of irrationality that comes with political disagreement.

These, then, are the lessons from the East. Tend to our relationships, cultivate ourselves and create and follow the Dao. These three simple lessons would help the West solve many of its problems.